

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN JEST BOOKS

By HARRY B. WEISS



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Cambridge JESTS:

BEING

Wit's Recreation.

*If what's here said, don't every Humour fit,
Cease to find Fault, 'till you can find more Wit.*



Newcastle. printed in this present Year,



Pasquils Iests,

Mixed with Mother Bunches
Merriments.

Whereunto is added a doozen of Gullies.

Pretty and pleasant, to drive
away the tediousnesse of a
Winters Evening.

Wm Shakspeare



Imprinted at London for Iohn Browne,
and are to be sold at his shop in Saint
Dunstons Church-yard, in Fleet-
street 1604.

Cambridge Jests. An early English jest book
printed in Newcastle

Pasquils Jests, London, 1604. The signature William
Shakespeare is thought to be a forgery. This
jest book is in the British Museum



Joe Miller's JESTS:

OR, THE

W I T S

V A D E - M E C U M.

BEING

A Collection of the most Brilliant JESTS,
the Politest REPARTS, the most Eleg-
ant BONS MOTS, and most pleasant short
Stories in the *English* Language.

First carefully collected in the Company, and
many of them transcribed from the Mouth of the fac-
tious GENTLEMAN, whose Name they bear, and now set
forth and published by his lamenable friend and former
Companion, *Ezrah Tickler, Esq.*

Most Humbly INSCRIBED

To those CHOICE-SPIRITS of the AGE,

Captain BODEN, Mr. ALEXANDER POPE,
Mr. Professor LACY, Mr. Orator HENLEY,
and JOE BAKER, the Kettle-Drummer.

L O N D O N :

Printed and Sold by T. READ, in *Dorset Street, White*
Frize, First Street, Macclesfield.

(Price One Shilling.)

The Old American Comic Almanac, Boston, 1839

Joe Miller's Jests. London, 1739



New Minstrel Jokes, Baltimore, 1913
Fisher's Comic Almanac, New York, 1854

The American Joe Miller, New York, 1849
Hobbo Jokes, New York, 1917

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN JEST BOOKS¹

By HARRY B. WEISS

ALTHOUGH the term jest books may be construed so as to embrace all books containing humorous writings, it is herein restricted to the cheap, paper-covered, joke books that were, and still are, printed in large editions for sale to the general public, usually for comparatively small sums of money. I am not concerned, in this account, with the types of humor found in the various jest books, nor with the complicated mechanics of laughter and whether or not it is produced by travesty, plays upon words or puns, bad grammar, defeated expectations, off-color or misspelled words, feelings of superiority, humorous situations, ignorance, exaggeration, or any of the other devices employed to produce laughter. In general it may be said that ninety-eight per cent of the joke books contain no delicate epigrams, or sharp, brilliant wit, and that neither sophistication nor acute perception is needed to understand them. After reading hundreds of "jokes," I became totally unreceptive and they produced only boredom. Unless the time and place are right and unless one is in a receptive mood, even good jokes will not cause amusement. Although some examples of the humor found in jest books will be quoted, this account will deal mainly with the vehicles that conveyed the jokes, or in other words, with the printed circulatory systems.

Before discussing American jest books, some mention should be made of their ancestors, especially their English ones. There is little doubt that the forerunners of our jest books were the facetious tales that circulated during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries under such titles as *A Hundred Mery Talys* (London, c. 1525), *Mery Tales Wittie Questions and Quicke Answeres* (London, 1567), *Merie Tales of Skelton* (London, 1566-7), *Jests of Scogin* (London, 1565-6), *Sackful of Newes* (1673, but known in 1557), *Tarlton's Jests* (London, 1611), *Merry Conceited Jests of George Peele* (London, 1607), *Merie Tales of the Mad Men of Gotham* (London, 1613), *Conceits, Clinches, Flashes and Whimsies* (London, 1639), and others. These black-letter books of facetiae, containing not only English humor, but humor that circulated all over the world, were gathered together in 1814 and printed in a small edition by the Chiswick Press. However, in 1864 a more complete edition, edited by W. Carew Hazlitt was published in London under the title *Shakespeare Jest Books* because they were supposed to have been used by Shakespeare. The tales therein range from short to lengthy

¹ The material on which this brief history is based exists for the most part in The New York Public Library to which I am greatly indebted. For other help my thanks are extended to the American Antiquarian Society, Yale University Library, Cleveland Public Library, The Public Library of the City of Boston, Wehman Bros., of New York City, and I. & M. Ottenheimer of Baltimore.

accounts, and most of them are much longer than the jokes in our present-day jest books.

Their supposed authors, Skelton, Tarlton, Peele and others had nothing to do with them. The stories were compiled by anonymous writers who then attached to them the names of famous clowns, actors or other persons so as to make the books popular and increase sales. Although *The Merie Tales of the Mad Men of Gotham*, later changed to *Wise Men of Gotham*, are supposed by Ashton to have been written by Andrew Borde or Boorde, a physician who lived in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and who died in the Fleet, April, 1549, where he had been imprisoned, it is doubtful if he had anything to do with them. His name also appears on the title pages of *Scogin's Jestes* and *A Historie of the Mylner of Abyngton*, doubtless having been put there by unscrupulous publishers. Many of the tales in these early black-letter jest books are coarse, but when originally published they were quite in tune with public morals and decency.

With the development of printing and the increase in learning by the masses, more and more people could read and write and along with other printed material more and more jest books were published during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There was *Cambridge Jestes*, printed in Newcastle. And Oxford University also had its jest book *Gratiae Ludentes* printed not in Oxford, but in London in 1628. *Pasquils Jestes Mixed with Mother Bunches Merriments* was published in Fleet Street, London, by John Browne in 1604, and in 1607 *The Pleasant Conceites of Old Hobson* appeared in London. Richard Tarlton, a comedian famous in Elizabeth's time, who died in 1589, for some years escaped having a jest book named after him, but in 1611 the inevitable happened. *Richard Tarlton's Jestes* appeared, and was followed by later editions.

Many other titles of English jest books of this period could be mentioned but only one more will be considered, the famous *Joe Miller's Jestes* which made its bow in London in 1739. Joe Miller, a comedian who could neither read nor write, and who could not make jokes and who learned his parts with the assistance of his wife, had nothing to do with it of course. He died in 1738 and after his death chapbook publishers brought out numerous editions of *Joe Miller's Jestes* almost to the end of the eighteenth century.

These jest books with their varied titles frequently contained the same jokes and even in their own times people must have considered many of them as humbugs. The same unhappy jest can be traced through many of them. In *Gratiae Ludentes*, *jestes from the Universitie*, appears the joke about the poor shot and the safest place being at the target, and this certainly is not unknown today. Many of the jests are old yarns and stale jokes with changes in names, places and circumstances and many are circulating today and probably producing laugh-

ter. Even the jokes in the famous Joe Miller books were compilations from the jest books of the preceding 200 years, brought up to date, and some are still going the rounds. The following from the 1739 edition of Joe Miller will be recognized at once as still current:

A Lady's Age happening to be questioned, she affirmed, she was but Forty, and call'd upon a Gentleman that was in Company for his Opinion; Cousin, said she, do you believe I am in the Right, when I say I am but Forty? I ought not to dispute it, Madam, reply'd he, for I have heard you say so these ten years.

Many of the stories in these jest books are either only faintly humorous or absolutely pointless and there is no need to reproduce them. Nevertheless they were printed and sold in large quantities year after year, frequently with illustrated title pages and frontispieces and often with the date of publication omitted so that they could be sold as new year after year.

Many British jest books flourished during the eighteenth century. London appeared to be the chief production center, but publishers in Belfast, Glasgow, York, Falkirk, Penrith, etc., etc., etc., brought them out also, many embellished by frontispieces and woodcuts. Sometimes there was an attempt at specialization as indicated by the title *The Comedian's Tales: or, Jests, Songs, and Pleasant Adventures of Several Famous Players . . .* London: T. Warner, at the Black-Boy in Pater-Noster-Row, and W. Pepper, at the Crown in Maiden-Lane, Covent Garden, 1729. This is a small octavo of ninety-two pages, with a woodcut frontispiece. It is full of low humor and anecdotes of old actors.

J. Robinson, of London, brought out in 1751 a second edition of *Ben Jonson's Jests; or, the Wit's Pocket Companion. Being a New Collection of the Most Ingenious Jests, Diverting Stories, Pleasant Jokes, Smart Repartees, Excellent Puns, Wise Sayings, Witty Quibbles and Ridiculous Bulls*. This is a small octavo of 140 pages with a frontispiece entitled *O Rare Ben Jonson*.

The Middlesex Printing Office at 81 Shoe Lane, London, published a small 12mo of twenty-four pages, with woodcuts, about 1760, entitled *The History of that Celebrated Lady Ally Croaker, in Which Is Contained more Fun than ever Was Sold at so Small Expense, consisting of Funny Jokes and Blunders . . .* According to Halliwell, this is a collection of Irish bulls in narrative form. Alicia Croker, a great beauty of her time and the subject of numerous verses, had nothing to do with such a jest book. She was one of the two sisters of Edward Croker, high sheriff of Limerick County in 1735. This was simply another instance of the liberty that jest book and chapbook publishers took with famous names and the undignified use to which they were put.

A small 12mo of twenty-four pages, published in 1772, has the following informative title: *The Jester's Gimcrack; or, Two-pennyworth of Fun. Containing Merry Stories, Smart Repartees, Droll Sayings, Youthful Pranks, Ridiculous Bulls, Funny Jokes, &c of the English, Irish, Scotch, and Welsh Manufacture. To which is added a variety of conundrums, toasts, sentiments, hob-nobs, &c. The whole adapted to the capacities of youth as well as infants six feet high, and calculated for the entertainment of persons of both sexes of whatever age, size, sect, or denomination. Multum in parvo. Compiled (with additions) by John Pendred, York, printed by somebody, sold to anybody, may be read by everybody excepting nobody, either when he is in company or when nobody's with him but himself alone at sea. 1772.*

Dozens of additional titles could be mentioned as having been published during the latter part of the eighteenth and the first part of the nineteenth centuries, some continuing to appear as late as 1850. There were *The Frisky Jester, Town and Country Jester, The Theatre of Fun, Sir John Fielding's Jests, Peter Cunningham's New Jest Book, The Jolly Jester, The Polite Jester, Yorick's Jests, Gleanings of Wit, The Care Killer, The New Festival of Wit, Morsels for Merry and Melancholy Mortals*, and many more, each containing from 8 to 144 and more pages, the majority however not going beyond 24. They were printed in London, Derby, Edinburgh, Elgin, Galkirk, Glasgow, Kilmarnock, Manchester, Otley, Worcester, Stirling, Warrington, etc.

With the foregoing brief background of English jest books it is now possible to consider popular American jest books. If this were a history of American humor, it would be necessary to start with Nathaniel Ward and his prose satire entitled *The Simple Cobler of Aggawam in America*, that was published in London in 1647, but this work cannot by any means be considered as a cheap jest book of the chapbook type. Evans' *American Bibliography* covering the years from 1639 to 1799 lists about two dozen titles of what appear to be jest books, published from 1773 to 1799, some of them being different editions of the same title. From this it would seem as if American jest books, as such, did not exist in the Colonies and if such books actually circulated, they were, in all probability, English ones that had been imported. There were numerous Colonial pamphlets on religion, piety, sin, sermons, prayer, etc., and toward the end of this period, titles appeared on health, the duty of parents, currency, government, geography, farming, slaves, etc., including a few jest book titles. And the Colonial almanacs contained occasional anecdotes. The absence of printed jest books during practically the entire Colonial period does not, by any means, imply that oral jests did not circulate as freely as they always have throughout the entire period of human history.

A few of the jest books listed by Evans are herewith noted. In 1774 *Shakespeare's Jests, or the Jubilee Jester* was apparently published in New York. In 1787 Daniel Bowen compiled and printed *A Collection of Funny, Moral, and Entertaining Stories and Bon Mots*. This 16mo of thirty-two pages was published in New Haven. *The American Jest-book, Containing a Curious Variety of Jests, Anecdotes, Bon-mots, Stories, etc.* parts I and II, was printed in Philadelphia in 1789 by Henry Taylor, for M. Carey and W. Spotswood. The second part, a 12mo of ninety-six pages was entitled *The Merry-Fellows Companion. Being the Second Part of the American Jest-book: Containing a Choice Collection of Anecdotes, Bon-mots, Jests, Repartees, Stories, &c. &c.* Another edition of both parts apparently came from the press of Mathew Carey of Philadelphia in 1791.

Under a slightly different title the same two parts appeared later with the following imprints "Boston: Printed and sold by W. Spotswood, 1796," 240 p. 12mo, and "Harrisburg: Printed [by John Wyeth] for Mathew Carey, 1796-97." *The American Jester*, New England 1807, appears to be a later edition of *The Merry-fellow's Companion* or the second part of *The American Jest-book*. *The American Jest-book* was patterned after the English "Joe Miller" and consists of prose accounts and anecdotes of a miscellaneous nature, only a few of which have an American flavor. Nearly all have an English taste and contain many references to London and European cities. Substitution, in some cases, of the names of American personages and places failed entirely to make them American jests and the supposedly humorous accounts are not associated with the fashions, beliefs and customs of America. Constance Rourke has stated that only slight traces of native humor can be found in most of the American joke books before 1840.

According to Evans, in Philadelphia, 1789, Henry Taylor printed *The Laughing Philosopher, or Thoughts on Jestings: Containing Rules by which a Proper Judgment of Jests may be Formed, and the Criterion for Distinguishing True and Genuine Wit from that which is False and Spurious: Together with Instructions for Improving the Taste of Those who have a Natural Turn for Pleasantry and Good Humour*, by George Friedrich Meier.

The next year, 1790, the same printer, Henry Taylor, printed for Robert Campbell *The Jolly Hibernian in Full Glee; or, Complete Irish Jester, and Wits Vade-mecum. Containing a more Humorous Variety of Original Stories, Comical Bulls, Witty Repartees, Entertaining Anecdotes, Jests, &c., than ever Appeared in the Irish or any other Language. To Which are Added, the Facetious History of John Gilpin, and a new Song in Praise of St. Patrick*. At least this did not pretend to be American. During the same year, William Woodhouse of Philadelphia printed and sold the *Philadelphia Jest Book, and Cheerful, Witty*

Companion and in 1791 *The New Entertaining Philadelphia Jest-book, and Cheerful Witty Companion*.

Another title that did not pretend to be American was *The Comical Sayings of Paddy from Cork, with his Coat Buttoned Behind, to Keep his Belly Warm. Being an Elegant Conference betwixt English Tom and Irish Paddy*. This was printed by George Hough at Concord in 1793, by John Trumbull of Norwich in 1794 and by James Angell for Fisher and Cole, at Baltimore in 1794. Or they may all have been printed at the same place and time, with different title pages.

A 12mo of sixty pages, printed in London, 1794, is entitled *Tom Paine's Jests: Being an Entirely New and Select Collection of Patriotic Bon-mots, Repartees, Anecdotes, Epigrams, Observations, &c. on Political Subjects, by Thomas Paine, and other Supporters of the Rights of Man*. According to Evans this was also printed by Mathew Carey of Philadelphia in 1794, and another edition was printed by Carey in 1796. This book is dedicated "To the Swinish Multitude," in spite, as Mr. Paine said, of the contempt in which Mr. Burke, and others like him, held the general public. This work which is not a jest book at all contains 124 prose accounts. Two extracts are quoted as follows:

No. 6. It is an observation of a French author, that there is no example of an English minister who began a war, continuing in office till its conclusion.

No. 48. Notwithstanding the many severe examples made in our courts of justice, of persons for speaking seditiously, a man had the audacity lately to assert, in a public coffee-room, that *two and two made four*.

In 1795, at Burlington, there was "Printed by I. Neale, for Neale and Kammerer, jun. 24, North Third Street, Philadelphia," a jest book of 132 pages, 12mo, with the following lengthy title, *Feast of Merriment, A new American Jester. Being a most Curious Collection of Witty Jests — Merry Stories — Smart Repartee — Droll Adventures — Funny Jokes — Wise Sayings — Anecdotes — Waggeries — Whims — Puns — Bon Mots — and Laughable Tricks, Many of which were Never before Published. To Which are Added a Clever Collection of Curious Epitaphs, Humorous Epigrams — Amorous and Facetious Songs — Conundrums — Toasts — Sentiments, &c. Compiled principally for the Amusement of long Winter Evenings — to Expel care-drawn Grief — create Mirth — and Give the Reader a Light Heart and Cheerful Countenance. By Well-fed Domine Double Chin, esq.*

At Boston, Tom Hazard, in 1798 printed and sold for 9 shillings a twenty-four-page 8vo called, *The Merry Fellow's Pocket Companion Containing a large*

Number of Witty Anecdotes, Bon Mots, and Curious Stories. By Billy Broadgrin. You that in pleasant tales delight, To pass the tedious time away, Some cold and stormy winter's night, Peruse this small book, I pray; 'Twill make a priest or deacon laugh his fill; and cure the spleen beyond the doctor's skill. And Nathaniel Coverly, junior, at Faust's Head, Essex Street, in Salem, in 1799, brought out eighty-two pages, 12mo, of Laugh and be Fat, or, an Antidote against Melancholy. Containing a great Variety of Comical Intrigues and Fine Stories: Witty Epigrams and Comical Whims: Epitaphs, Humorous Jests, etc. Written by the most Ingenious Authors of the Age.

The Youthful Jester that appeared in Baltimore in 1800 contains stories, verse, domestic and foreign jokes and especially Irish bulls, as for example, two Irishmen were ten miles from London. "By my shoul and St. Patrick," says one, "it is but five miles apiece." This jest in substantially the same form may be found in modern jest books.

The Chaplet of Comus; or Feast of Sentiment, and Festival of Wit, a 324-page 24mo, published in 1811, by Munroe and Francis of Boston contains mainly short, prose accounts, only a few of which are slightly connected with America. Most of them are English and the American ones do not contain real native humor. *The Feast of Wit, or Frolic of Laughter; Containing the most Admired Anecdotes and Songs. By Comus, the God of Laughter*, Philadelphia: Published and Sold by E. T. Scott, No. 61, North Eighth Street. 1821, devotes its 144 pages to short, prose stories, songs, poems, etc., including Robin Adair, Star Spangled Banner, etc. Although American names appear in the anecdotes, the atmosphere is English.

The same is true of *King's Columbian Jester: Being a choice Collection of Entertaining Anecdotes* published in New York, by W. Borradaile in 1823. This 24-page chapbook, which has a colored frontispiece, is filled almost entirely with English jokes, most of them being only faintly humorous. Two examples are quoted:

Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, was accustomed to make an annual feast to which she invited all her relations. At one of these family-meetings she drank their health, adding, What a glorious sight it is to see such a number of branches, flourishing from one root! but observing Jack Spencer laugh, insisted on knowing what occasioned his mirth; and promising to forgive him, be it what it would. Why, then, madam, said he, I was thinking how much more all the branches would flourish if the root were under the ground.

A young lady, going into a barrack-room at Fort George, saw an officer toasting a slice of bread on the point of his sword. On which she exclaimed, "I think, Sir, you have got the staff of life on the point of death."

Two more titles will be sufficient to indicate the type of American jest book that circulated up to about 1840 and that contained only a few traces of American humor. Maltby, Goldsmith & Co., of New Haven, published in 1818 *Joke upon Joke, Being a New and Choice Collection of Anecdotes, Bon Mots, Puns, Odities, [sic] and most Approved Witty Sayings, Carefully Collected, Selected, and Nothing of importance Neglected. By Sam Splicem.* This was 12¾ x 8 cm. and contained ninety-six pages. And in 1814, Evert Duyckinck of 102 Pearl Street, New York, brought out *Funny Stories or the American Jester. Being a Companion for a Merry Good Fellow. Containing choice Stories, Funny Anecdotes, Wise Sayings, Smart Repartees, &c., &c.*

Although all the American jest books noted thus far do not qualify as cheap, paper-covered joke books, most of them do and, regardless of their formats and titles all are filled mostly with English jokes.

Many eighteenth-century American almanacs contained bits of humor, frequently English ones which later were Americanized, but it was not until 1831 that the American comic almanac was really born. These comic almanacs which I think should be classified as jest books, stemmed from the humorous almanac, first published in England in 1652 under the title *Poor Robin* and imitated in eighteenth-century America with identical or similar names, such as *Poor Isaac*, *Poor Ned*, *Poor Roger*, *Poor Thomas*, *Poor Will*, *Poor Richard*, etc., the last being the most widely known.

According to Charles L. Nichols and to Clarence E. Brigham, *The American Comic Almanac for 1831*, published in Boston by Charles Ellms was the first of a long series of different varieties of comic almanacs that had an enormous circulation, and that lasted nearly to the Civil War. There were stragglers however and these continued to appear even as late as 1898 and perhaps afterward. In addition to the usual astronomical information these almanacs contained jokes and crudely drawn, supposedly comic pictures. Nichols states that more than thirty varieties were published in Massachusetts between 1830 and 1860. Numerous varieties were also published in New York state and city, Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Maryland and many other places. Ideas were stolen right and left. In the *American Comic Almanac for 1841*, S. N. Dickinson, the printer and later publisher of many almanacs wrote: "Ten years ago the first comic almanac was printed and in two years many similar were started. A few years later (1833) I started the 'Crockett Almanac' and the next year Crockett almanacs were published in various parts of the country."

A flood of comic almanacs circulated under such names as *The Comic Token*, *Broad Grins*, *Finn's Comic*, *Fisher's Comic*, *Turner's Comic*, *United States Comic*, *Yankee Nations Comic*, *Crockett's Awl-Man-Axe*, *Elton's Commic*, *Old*

Fogy's Comic, Rip Snorter, Sam Slick's All-My-Neck, Yankee Doodle Comic, Jenny Lind's Comic, Komical Comic All-I-Make, Alligator Comic, Crockett's Texas Oldmanick, Peoples' Comic, Paul De Kock's Comic, Every Body's Comick, Old American Comic, Marsh's Comic Allmynack, Uncle Sam's Almanac, The Comic Almanac, Devil's Comical Oldmanick, and others. Most of these almanacs are about 20 x 12 cm., and consist of eighteen leaves or thirty-six pages, including the covers, all usually unnumbered. The first cover page, which also serves as a title page, is adorned by a comic illustration and the same is true for the last cover page, although some publishers advertise their wares on this page.

During the 1880's and later, various business firms purchased quantities of certain standardized varieties of comic almanac, on which their names were printed, and these were used as a form of advertising. Some comic almanacs were published by the same firm for many years, while others were short lived. Elton of New York City, Turner & Fisher of New York and Philadelphia, S. N. Dickinson of Boston, are a few of the names long associated with long series of such almanacs. Some publishers brought out numerous variations, all with different names, just as the wood-pulp publishers do today.

At first the jokes in the comic almanacs were English and Americanized English ones but later they were associated with American customs, ideas, politics and happenings. Along with the short jests, there were short humorous tales and verses. From the very first they abounded with crude comic illustrations. It is difficult to select from them, samples of the various types of humor. Many appear dull and far-fetched, and the following few are quoted without comment:

Charles Bannister being in company, and the conversation turning upon dreams, a person who put great faith in them, observed that something serious was likely to befall himself, for the night before he had dreamed of lice. Bannister replied that it was not at all wonderful, as people generally dreamed at night of what had been running in their heads the day before. (*Every Body's Comick Almanack*, 1837, New York, Turner & Fisher.)

A cockney, observing a girl standing at the door of a farm-house, thought to show his wit by asking if the pigs were fed. To which she answered, 'You know best whether you have had your breakfast.' (*Every Body's Comick Almanack*, 1839, Cincinnati.)

A gentleman, on a rainy day, met a farmer who said — 'Fine weather, this sir — it will make everything spring out of the earth.' 'Gad, I hope not!' said the gentleman, 'for I buried my wife yesterday.' (*The Old American Comic Almanac*, 1840, Boston, S. N. Dickinson.)

I should think you would feel small to be employed so, said a moral reform agent when he caught a young lady lacing herself. 'That's the very thing I am trying to do,' said she. (*Elton's Comic All-My-Nack*, 1842.)

"I've three cents left," said a loafer, "so I'll buy a paper with it."

"What paper will you buy?" said a friend, curious to learn the literary taste of his acquaintance.

"A paper of tobacco," replied the loafer. (*The Comic Almanac*, 1854, Philadelphia, King & Baird.)

The celebrated portrait painter, Stuart, once met a lady in the street in Boston, who saluted him with: "A! Mr. Stuart, I have just seen your miniature, and kissed it, was so much like you." "And did it kiss you in return?" "Why no!" "Then," said Stuart, "it was not like me." (*Fisher's Comic Almanac*, 1868, New York, Fisher & Denison.)

A wag who thought to have a joke at the expense of an Irish provision dealer, said:

"Can you supply me with a yard of pork?"

"Pat, give this gentlemen three pig's feet."

(*Fisher's Comic Almanack*, 1877, Philadelphia, Fisher & Brother.)

Tramp (at dentist's door) "I'd like my teeth filled."

Dentist — "What with — gold or silver?"

Tramp (eagerly) — "Oh, just plain bread will do!"

(*The Comic Almanac*, 1898, Philadelphia, I. C. Gerhart, Bookseller and Stationer.)

Many of the humorous anecdotes found in the comic almanacs are longer than the jests that have just been quoted, but their humor is about the same. In the so-called popular Crockett almanacs that were published in Nashville, New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Albany, and Baltimore, from 1835 to 1856, the contents of many included the tall tales and legends about that picturesque frontiersman Davy Crockett, both during his life and following his death, always in Crockett's brand of humor, and illustrated with crude wood engravings. On the other hand there were Crockett almanacs that differed in no degree from ordinary comic almanacs and simply masqueraded under a false name.

In passing it may be noted that in 1844, Bristol's Sarsaparilla Company of Boston, issued *Bristol's Free Almanac* which was the first of a multitude of patent medicine almanacs that continued for many years and which appear in reduced numbers even at present. Many of these contained jokes and humorous illustrations, but they can not be considered as jest books.

Although the comic almanacs enjoyed widespread popularity for many years, there were other jest books in circulation at the same time. For example there was *The American Joe Miller. With humorous Illustrations*, a 24mo of 219 pages, published by Carey and Hart of Philadelphia in 1839.

H. Long and Bro. of 43 Ann Street, New York, brought out, in 1849, *The American Joe Miller Illustrated with One Hundred Engravings*. This is 18.5 x 11.5 cm., with gray paper covers and consists of 108 pages of text, a frontispiece portrait of "Joseph Miller" and numerous comic illustrations and initial letters. The title on the illustrated cover is *The American Joe Miller or Punch for the Million with over 100 Engravings drawn by Kenny Meadows, Cruikshank, Leach, Phiz, Hemming, Hine, Crowquill, Doyle, &c. Engraved by S. P. Avery. Price 25 cents*. The illustrations in this and in *The Book of 1000 Comical Stories*, published by Dick & Fitzgerald in 1859, remind one of the comic drawings in *Cruikshank's Comic Almanacks* which appeared yearly in London, from 1835 to 1853, and are far better than those common to nearly all American jest books. Pages 9 to 21 of *The American Joe Miller* deal with the "biography of Joe Miller" and the remainder consists of prose anecdotes and jokes, some with an English flavor.

In 1859 Dick & Fitzgerald of No. 18 Ann Street, New York, published *The Book of 1000 Comical Stories; an Endless Repast of Fun a Rich Banquet for every Day in the Year, with several Courses, and a Dessert. [verse] Bill of Fare: Comprising Tales of Humor, Laughable Anecdotes, Irresistible Drolleries, Jovial Jokes, Comical Concerts, Puns and Pickings, Quibbles and Queries, Bon Mots and Broadgrins, Oddities, Epigrams, etc., etc. [illus.] Merry Songs for Merry Moments; Conundrums for the Million; An Inexhaustible Store of Nuts to Crack, and Sports and Pastimes for all Seasons; Forming a Welcome Guest for Spring, a Cheerful Friend for Summer, a Jovial Host for Autumn, a Pleasant Companion for Winter, and a varied Feast of Mirth for Everybody's Enjoyment. Appropriately Illustrated with 250 Comic Engravings. By the Author of "Mrs. Partington's Carpet-bag of Fun."*

This 120-page book, 19.5 x 11.5 cm., with its orange-colored paper covers sold for thirty cents and the illustration on the first cover-page is signed by Avery as engraver. It is filled with comic poetry, humorous anecdotes, short jests, numerous, diverting comic illustrations and humorously decorated initial letters. The cover carries the title *A Plate of Chowder, or Endless Repast of Fun*. According to the preface, the publishers had been successful previously with other jest books entitled *The American Joe Miller*, *Laughing Gas*, and *Mrs. Partington's Carpet Bag of Fun*.

Old Abe's Jokes fresh from Abraham's Bosom. Containing all his Issues, Excepting the Greenbacks, to Call in some of Which, this Work is Issued, was published in 1864 by T. R. Dawley of 13 and 15 Park Row, New York. This 135-page 12mo contains prose accounts, dealing with President Lincoln, his sayings, jokes, etc.

William Brisbane Dick, under the pseudonym Joshua Jedidiah Jinks, was the author of *Uncle Josh's Trunk-full of Fun. A Portfolio of First Class Wit and Humor . . .*, which Dick & Fitzgerald published in New York about 1869. Its sixty-four pages are filled with jokes, short stories, puzzles, poetry, recitations, number tricks, epitaphs and crude illustrations, all interspersed with advertisements of the firm's other publications.

Even Beadle and Adams of 98 William Street, New York, had their joke books. In 1875, "Beadle's Dime Pocket Joke Book No. 1," and "No. 2," were copyrighted. These are 16.5 x 11 cm., sixty-four pages, with cover-title illustrations in colors, and humorous illustrations in the text. Anecdotes, conundrums, stories, many of them long and most of them American, make up the contents.

The Benedict Popular Publishing Company of New York in the 1880's sold thirty-eight different types of handbook on such subjects as recitations, magic, dreams, etc., including jokes, and one of their joke books, a 16mo of sixty pages was called *Whimsical Whitfield's Volume of Fun. Consisting entirely of Humorous Stories, Gags, Recitations, Stump Speeches, Sketches, Songs, Jokes, &c.* Whimsical Whitfield, it appears was J. G. Whitfield, who flourished as a comedian and a humorist from about 1863 to 1880. The title of this book is quite descriptive of its contents.

In 1870 Henry J. Welhman of 108 Park Row, New York City, published *The Hokey Pokey Joker Full of the "Cream of Comicality" the "Slings" of Sociality, the "Sours" of Suavity, and the "Champagne" of Chit-chat. Lots of funny "Picters."* This is a booklet of sixty-four pages, 18 x 11.5 cm., with pink, illustrated paper covers, copyrighted by Robert M. De Witt. It contains short and long prose jokes and anecdotes together with fifteen full-page illustrations, mostly of "yachting girls" that were intended to be funny. One of its anecdotes is quoted:

Right Sharp Lawyer — "Mr. Jenkins will you have the goodness to answer me, directly and categorically a few plain questions?"

Witness — "Certainly, sir."

L. — "Well Mr. Jenkins, is there a female living with you who is known in the neighborhood as Mrs. Jenkins?"

W. — "There is."

L. — "Is she under your protection?"

W. — "Yes."

L. — "Do you support her?"

W. — "I do."

L. — "Have you ever been married to her?"

W. — "I have not."

(Here several jurors scowled gloomily on Mr. Jenkins.)

L. — "That is all Mr. Jenkins."

Opposing Counsel — "Stop one moment, Mr. Jenkins. Is the female in question your mother?"

W. — "She is."

Wehman's Hokey Pokey Joker sold for twenty-five cents, also *Wehman's Budget of Jokes*, *Wehman's Budget of Irish Jokes*, and *Wehman's Budget of Dutch Jokes*. Wehman at this time also published many other booklets on popular recitations, parlor games, love letters, flirtations and the language of flowers, German and other languages without a teacher, poultry, live stock, dogs, rabbits, pigeons, and complete letter writing, most of them selling for twenty-five cents each. Penny song sheets were also published and sold in enormous quantities. In 1885 or thereabouts Henry J. Wehman's brother joined him in the business and the firm name became Wehman Bros. Before 1906 the firm's line included only about a dozen varieties of joke book, most of these being twenty-five or thirty-cent ones, but in 1907 the first of a ten-cent "Handy Pocket Size" series appeared and during the next twenty years, about sixty different titles were published, many of which are available at present. Two millions or more of these joke books were printed and sold, the peak being reached during the first world war when many were purchased to send to soldiers over seas and in camps at home.

These little ten-cent jest books, that were published by Wehman Bros., along with their other books on magic, dreams, song-birds, recitations, toasts, etc., are each 12.7 x 9.5 cm., and contain sixty-four pages, seven of them being devoted to the firm's advertising and the balance to jokes. Stiff paper covers carry a title and a comic illustration in colors as well as additional advertising. Nearly all are copyrighted and carry dates. There are no illustrations in the text. The titles include *Kid Jokes*, *Irish Yarns*, *Irish Wit and Humor*, *Cracker-Jack Jokes*, *Choice Vaudeville Jokes*, *Actors' Jokes*, *Stage Jokes*, *Boarding House Jokes*, *Snappy Jokes*, *Scotch Jokes*, *Hobo Jokes*, *Married Life Jokes*, *Peachy Jokes*, *Barber Shop Jokes* and many others.

The average printing of one of these joke books was about twenty or twenty-five thousand when the business was at its peak. Four or five years ago 5,000 was a fair-sized run. Until 1936 the firm was always located at some address on

Park Row or in that neighborhood and there were always Wehmans in the business. In May of that year however, Murray and Joseph Winters took over the entire establishment and have been carrying it on at 712 Broadway under the old name and in much the same way as its founders. Wherever joke books are sold the name Wehman Bros. is known and sales are still going on to such new outlets as "radio humorists."

Another firm of long standing, that has been publishing ten-cent jest books more or less similar in size and style to those just described is I. and M. Ottenheimer of Baltimore, Maryland. This firm started in the publishing business in 1890 and has published over 100 different titles of joke books for approximately 45 years, this being in addition to books on self-taught Spanish and Italian, fortune-telling, boxing, letter writing, dreams, hypnotism, how to become beautiful, etc. Their joke book titles include *Hash House Jokes*, *Kid Jokes*, *Charlie Chaplin's Chatter and Funny Sayings*, *Cowboy Jokes*, *Trolley Jokes*, *Actor Jokes*, *Clown Jokes*, *Snappy Jokes*, *Minstrel Jokes*, *Burlesque and Variety Jokes*, *Roaring Jokes*, *Up-To-Date-Smart Set Jokes*, *Original Drummer's Yarns*, *Ford Jokes and Stories*, etc., etc. Nearly all have copyright dates. Some, according to their title pages were edited by Irv. Ott or Moe Ott who are, of course, Irving and Moe Ottenheimer. All are without illustrations in the text, except *The Arkansaw I Saw*, published in 1919, which contains a few comic drawings. The sales of these joke books also were tremendous during the first world war, but dropped off after 1929. The printing on the back strip of the Ottenheimer jest books is in black while on the Wehman books, it is in red. Between them these two firms supplied the public for many years with enormous numbers of jest books, many of which are available at the present time.

In addition to firms that specialized in joke books there were others that published them occasionally. In 1877 G. W. Carleton & Co., of New York brought out *Josh Billings' Trump Kards. Blue Glass Philosophy. With illustrations in Natural History*, by F. S. Church, for twenty-five cents. This is full of characteristic Josh Billings' sayings and humorous essays, all with their misspelled words, together with twelve full-page comic illustrations. This little jest book of forty-six pages and paper covers (19 x 12.5 cm.) with its first cover page illustrated is unusual in that its remaining cover pages are filled with advertisements of New York firms selling clothing, food, soap, insurance, safes, shirts, carriages and a dentifrice called "sozodont."

The Arthur Westbrook Co., of Cleveland, Ohio, that specialized in twenty-cent novels by Laura Jean Libby, Marie Corelli, Charlotte M. Breame, and other ladies whose stories aroused the emotions, also published nine or ten different joke books including *New Hibernian Jokes*, *New Vaudeville Jokes*, *New Yiddish*

Jokes and *New Tramp Jokes*. The latter is 18.5 x 12.5 cm., with fifty-two pages of jokes and twelve pages of advertising devoted to letter writers, dream books, fortune tellers, cook books, and other publications of the firm. It is undated but was probably published about 1910. This firm was founded in 1908 and was in business about thirty years.

Julian Gore, author and distributor of humorous books, 32nd and S Streets, N. W., Washington, D. C., wrote and published *Jokes Galore*, *Jokes Some More* and *Jokes Once More*, the latter appearing in 1920. He also offered premiums of air rifles, reversible automobile caps and toilet-sets to boys and girls for selling his joke books. *Jokes Once More* which is 18.5 x 12.5 cm., with stiff paper covers, the first one illustrated, contains sixty-two pages of jokes and toasts and sold for thirty-five cents. Nearly all the jokes are "dry" ones connected with prohibition which went into effect on June 30, 1919.

Once in a while joke books were privately printed for distribution during the holiday season. One of these is *The Brodie Plaid Wishing You a Merry Xmas and a Happy New Year for 1927, 1928 and 1929*. This consists of ten unnumbered leaves within red plaid covers. The preface is signed Warren J. Brodie, and the booklet was printed in an edition of 500 copies. It contains no other identifying information and as indicated by its title is filled entirely with Scotch Jokes, a few of which are quoted:

What is the difference between a Scotchman and a cocoanut?

You can get a drink out of a cocoanut.

They were seated in the dining car on the Sunnyland, bound for Alabama. "Notice that Scotchman," she remarked to her escort as her eyes turned in the direction of a man seated at another table across the aisle.

"I see a man," replied her escort, "but I don't know that he's a Scotchman. What makes you think that he is?"

"He licked his spectacles after eating his grapefruit."

Sandy MacPherson, after being shown to his room in a hotel, looked from the window and noticed a large illuminated clock in a tower across the street. He stopped his watch.

Some of the *Little Blue Books* published by Haldeman-Julius Publications, Girard, Kansas, are devoted to jokes. From 1926 to 1929 about fifteen titles of this sort were published and there may have been more later. These in part are called *The Best Jokes About Doctors*, *The Best Irish Jokes*, *The Best Negro Jokes*, *The Best Jewish Jokes*, *The Best Jokes About Lawyers*, *The Best Jokes About Drunks*, *The Best Jokes About Preachers*, etc. These little books of 12.5 x

9 cm., have sixty-four pages between their plain, unadorned stiff, blue paper covers and carry no illustrations or advertising.

In 1937 the Louellen Publishing Co., Inc., of New York City brought out sixty-four different ten-cent varieties of joke books, each 13 x 10 cm., with thirty pages of jokes and two pages of advertising. The cover title is illustrated in colors and the remaining stiff paper covers carry advertisements of the firm's other publications. These little joke books each carry six full-page comic illustrations of a sketchy nature.

This firm also published in 1937 *Joe Miller's Joke Book, the Latest and Most Complete Collection of Humorous Gems of History. Puns, Quips, Gags, and Jokes*, a 19 x 14 cm., sixty-four-page book with an illustrated cover title, in colors. The preface states seriously that the best of Joe Miller's masterpieces have been gathered together, which in itself is a sort of joke.

During the past ten or twelve years a new crop of jest books has appeared, as monthlies, quarterlies and annuals. They are far removed in appearance from the little pocket joke books of previous times. They hang in rows on the news-stands of to-day flaunting their gayly colored covers in competition with hosts of other magazines. They range in size from 19 x 14 cm., to 35 x 26 cm., and from 62 to 128 pages. Unlike many of the old joke books they are illustrated by comic pictures and drawings, in fact some contain only cartoons with a line of type beneath. Others contain page after page of jokes relieved only occasionally by illustrations. Some are copyrighted and others are not. They are published in various places, New York, Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis, Springfield, Mass., etc. Their cover pages are always glossy and in colors. The first cover page is frequently adorned by photographs of stage, screen or radio stars, or by comic illustrations, or by drawings of partially undraped, shapely females.

In addition to gags, cartoons and crossword puzzles some of these magazines contain rather broad sexy jokes and so-called "art photos," but these characteristics are not by any means common to all. Most of them stick to their gags, wise-cracks and jokes and differ from the older jest books only in their size, color and illustrations. Their names include *Lu Lu*, *Smiles*, *Eye Opener's Annual*, *Wise Cracks*, *Tickles*, *Humor Digest*, *New Jokes*, *1,000 Jokes*, *Let's Laugh*, *Nifty*, etc. Some appear for a few months and then disappear to be replaced by others with different names.

In considering American jest books, including comic almanacs, over the past 150 years, I find that they have one characteristic in common. Their jokes are all respectable and could be repeated in almost any family circle. Whether they are dull or funny depends upon the mood and receptivity of the individual.

Cheap, paper-covered jest books have always had plenty of competition from many other printed and spoken sources. For example many comic periodicals of one kind and another have always circulated along with the jest books. In New York there were *The Wasp* (1802) and the *Corrector* (1804) both devoted to political satire; *Salmagundi* (1807), which made fun of fads and foibles; the *New York Picayune* (1847), and the *Comic World* (1855). In Boston there were *The Jester* (1845), an American imitation of *Punch*; and the *Carpet Bag* (1851). And in addition, there were *Frank Leslie's Budget of Fun* (1858), and *Vanity Fair* (1860), both being considered the best of the comic periodicals; *Wild Oats* (1870); *Judge* (1881); *Life* (1883) and many others. Nearly all had short lives. Brander Matthews writing in the *American Bibliopolist* in 1875 (vii, 199, Aug.) said that "the history of comic journalism in America is merely a list of tombstones."

However in spite of this competition from comic periodicals, short lived or otherwise, and in spite of the jokes in magazines and newspapers, jest books managed to survive as a small percentage of the total output of humor. With so many humorous periodicals in the field to-day it might appear to some that the day of the jest book is over, but I am of the opinion that it will survive in the future as in the past, and that this survival will be due in the future, as in the past, to new generations of publishers and readers. The old jokes will go on forever.

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